

*The Case of Subscription to Articles
of Religion Considered.*

A
S E R M O N

Preach'd at the

TRIENNIAL VISITATION

O F T H E

Right Reverend Father in GOD,

J O H N,

Lord Bishop of

O X F O R D :

H E L D A T

St. Mary's in OXFORD,

On TUESDAY, JULY 20, 1725.

By JOHN CONTBEARE, D.D.

Rector of EXETER College in Oxford.

Published at the Request of His Lordship and the Clergy.

The THIRD EDITION.

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The City of Oxford to the
of Religion

A
SERMON

Preached at the
TRINITY VISITATION

OF THE
TRINITY VISITATION



O X F O R D

St Mary's in OXFORD

On Tuesday, July 20, 1775

By JOHN COMBER, D.D.
Rector of Exeter College in Oxford

The Third Edition

L O N D O N
Printed for S. Knapton, in Pall-mall, and for J. D. Collier, in St. Dunstons Church-yard, 1775

TO THE
Right Reverend Father in GOD,
F O H N,

By Divine Permission,

LORD BISHOP

OF

O X F O R D :

And, To the Reverend

The C L E R G Y

Of the DEANERIES of

Oxford and Cuddesden;

This DISCOURSE,

Published at their Request,

Is, with all Humility, Dedicated.

TO THE

Right Reverend Father in God,

F O R M

By Divine Permission,

LORD BISHOP

OF

O X F O R D :



And

The C O R P O R A T I O N

OF THE DEAN AND CHAPTER

Oxford and Cuddesden;

This DISCOURSE,

Published at their Request,

In the City of London, Printed,

Vilitation Sermon,

Preach'd at

St. Mary's in OXFORD.

I TIM. vi. 3, 4.

If any Man teach otherwise, and consent not unto wholesom Words, even the Words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the Doctrine which is according to Godliness; He is proud, knowing nothing---

I Shall make none other Use of the Words now read, than to introduce a Discourse, *Concerning Subscription to Articles of Religion.* And forasmuch as Questions have been started with relation to the *Power* of demanding such a Subscription; --- The *Expediency* of exercising such a Power; ---and the *Nature* and *Extent* of the Subscription it self; it will not be improper to examine particularly into this Subject.

A Discourse of this kind may be thought the more suitable, because the Audience, be-

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fore

6 *The CASE of* Subscription

fore whom I speak, is especially Interested in this Point. These Tests of our Opinions, in religious Matters, are not only requir'd of us at our Ordinations, but upon several other Occasions to be repeated by us. We therefore are concern'd, in an extraordinary manner, to examine into this Subject; as well for the private Satisfaction of our own Minds, as to justify our Conduct and Behaviour to the World.

But, before I proceed farther, it will be necessary to offer some Observations concerning the true State of the Subject before us: because, by not attending carefully to This, We shall be led off from the main Point, and perplex'd with Objections difficult to be answer'd. After which, I will distinctly consider the principal Questions, which arise from the Subject so stated.

The Case then, which I have in View at present, relates to *the Thirty-nine Articles of our Church*. But forasmuch as These consist of Propositions, tho' equally true, yet not of equal Importance, it may not be amiss to observe, in the

First Place, A Distinction suggested in the very Title of these Articles, *viz.* The Distinction between Articles of *Faith*, and Articles of *Religion*. Articles of *Faith* (in the strictest Sense of that Expression) consist only of such Truths as are *fundamental* in the Christian Scheme: These are collected in the *Apostles Creed*, and farther explain'd in the *Athanasian* and *Nicene*. By Articles of *Religion* we understand such Truths, as being founded in Scripture, the Word of God, have a certain Evidence;

dence ; but not bearing so close and immediate a Relation to the *main* Branches of the Christian Scheme, are therefore of an inferior Nature.

Having noted this, I am led on to observe farther, that as there is, in the Reason of things, a considerable Difference between the Case of the *Clergy* and of the *Laity*, so the Wisdom of the Church hath carefully preserv'd this Difference in relation to *Subscriptions*. The latter, meerly consider'd as Christians, are requir'd to profess their Belief of the *fundamental* Articles of our Faith ; which being first done in *Baptism*, is afterward repeated in the daily Offices of the Church. Ordinarily this is all : And other Doctrines, as not being the *distinguishing* and *essential* Marks of a Christian, (however true in themselves) are yet less necessary to be distinctly understood, and explicitly profess'd by them. But much more may reasonably be demanded from those, who are to *officiate* in sacred Matters. A clearer and fuller Comprehension of the several Truths of the Gospel may be expected from the *Clergy*, than from *mere Laymen*. And when 'tis consider'd, that the Clergy are intrusted with explaining, and instructing Men in, the Truths of Christianity, too much Care cannot be taken to prevent the ill Effects either of their *Ignorance* or *Error* : For however These may be often pardonable in common Christians, whose Business it is to *learn* ; they can admit much less Excuse in Clergymen, whose Employment it is to *teach* : And the Church would poorly have provided for the *Reputation* of its Ministers,

8 *The CASE of Subscription*

sters, and the *Safety* of the People, if no Enquiry were made, what religious Opinions were maintain'd by the one, and would probably be infus'd into the other. Hence as well for the sake of publick Good, as of the orthodox Belief of particular Teachers, a *Subscription to Articles of Religion* is expected: The *Reasonableness* and *Expediency* of which Proceeding, I shall more fully represent in another Part of this Discourse.

I am to remark, in the next place, that Those Articles, to which Subscription is requir'd, should always be collected from, and founded on *Scripture*; this being the *only* Rule of a Christian's Faith or Belief: But yet it will by no means follow from hence, that they must always be express'd in *Scripture Terms*.

For, *First*, There are several Doctrines, of considerable moment, which may be *deduc'd*, by right Reasoning, from Truths laid down in Scripture; and are therefore contain'd in the sacred Writings, *not* in direct and express Terms, but *virtually* and *by Implication*. These, if at all propos'd, must be express'd in a mere *human Form*.

Others there are, represented in Expressions, which, taken by themselves, are of a very *doubtful* Meaning and Signification; but are *determin'd*, as to their Sense, by the Circumstances of the Place in which they are found: To draw out these Propositions from Scripture, and to express them in *Scripture Words*, would render That *indefinite* in the Article, which is *determinate* in the sacred Writings: In such Cases as these, we shall be oblig'd to vary the Expression in order to retain the Sense.

To

To this it may be *added*, that there are other Doctrines, which are rather *preservative* of Scripture Truth, than directly express'd in Scripture: Thus for Instance; The Church of *Rome* having advanc'd very groundless and dangerous Doctrines concerning *Purgatory, Indulgences*, and the like, it hath been judg'd proper to declare against these Errors, and to guard against such Corruptions, by requiring every Minister to subscribe a *Condemnation* of them. But can it be expected that every religious Error should be distinctly mention'd in Scripture? Is it not sufficient to lay down the Truth, without reciting every Position inconsistent with it? Or, is no erroneous Opinion to be condemn'd, which is not in express Terms condemn'd in Scripture? If Notions of this kind are not to be admitted, then some Articles may reasonably be propos'd, which are not express'd in *Scripture Terms*.

One thing yet remains in order to the full State of this Subject; and that is, to consider What is implied in the *Subscription it self*; Whether it expresses our *Assent* to the Truth of the Articles subscrib'd, or be only an Engagement not to *dispute or contradict* them.

I conceive it will appear, by what I am about to offer, that our Subscription amounts to an *Approbation of*, and *Assent to* the Truth of the Doctrines subscrib'd. And that,

First, Because This seems to be implied in the bare *Act of Subscribing*; and we should be understood, by every indifferent Spectator, as approving the Truth of those Doctrines, unless the *Form of Subscription* declar'd the contrary:
nor

10 *The CASE of Subscription*

nor would any one be apt to consider them as *Articles of Peace*, but as *Articles of Doctrine*.

This Notion is farther confirm'd by the very *Title* of the Articles themselves; For they are said to be fram'd for *the avoiding Diversities of Opinions*, and for *establisbing Consent touching true Religion*: But This End cannot be obtain'd, unless they are Subscrib'd as *Truths assented to*.

What hath been here said will receive greater Weight from considering the Declaration in the 36th Canon; in which we acknowledge *All the Thirty-nine Articles to be agreeable to the Word of God*; and consequently, to be Truths, which we *explicitly* receive, and *not* barely Doctrines not to be oppos'd.

Lastly, Let it be remember'd, that the Reason why the *Clergy* in particular are requir'd to subscribe, is this; because they are *Teachers* *. The Articles therefore must be suppos'd to contain Doctrines to be taught and inculcated on the People; and concerning which, it is not sufficient in a Teacher to be silent. Were the Case otherwise, it would follow, that the People are only guarded against the *Errors* of their Pastors, but not entitled to any *Assistance* from them. But if Teachers are to explain and recommend these Doctrines, then a *Subscription* to them must imply a *Belief* of them; unless it be maintain'd, that it is reasonable to *recommend* as True, what in our own Opinions we *condemn* as False.

Having proceeded thus far in stating this Subject, it will be proper that I should now

* See the Act 13. *Eliz.* which requires Subscription, &c.
consider

consider the most important Questions which arise from it : And these are,

First, What *Right* or *Power* the Church hath to demand such Subscriptions.

Secondly, How far it may be *reasonable* and *expedient* to exercise this Power. And,

Thirdly, What *Obligations* are laid on those Persons, who *submit* to this Power and *make* these Subscriptions.

For the better Decision of the first Question, We are to consider the Church, *not* barely as a Number of Persons, who profess a *Belief in Jesus Christ* as the promis'd *Messias*, but as a *religious Body* or *Society* of Men; who are united under *Christ* the supreme Governour, as well as Founder of this Society. Thus is it constantly represented in the *New Testament*. But were there nothing of this kind distinctly inculcated in the sacred Writings, yet would Men be naturally led to unite together, as well in a *religious*, as a *civil* Capacity. Their common Concerns in spiritual Affairs render such an Union *desireable*; and the evident Interests of Religion make it both *expedient* and *necessary*. Upon this Account, tho' the Scriptures were *silent* on this Head, yet the *Expediency* of entering into a religious Union might influence those who are *truly* Religious; and the Reason of the thing be a sufficient Manifestation of the *Will of God*.

This Point being once gain'd, *viz.* That the Church is a *Society*, it follows, that it must be invested with all those Powers which are

essential to a Society: and to deny it any of those Powers, is by *consequence* to deny it to be a Society.

If then the Church hath a Right to all those Powers, which are *essential* to a Society, it must have This amongst others, viz. *To preserve it self*, as well from the Injuries of *domestick* as of *foreign* Enemies; and since whosoever hath a Right to the End, must have a Right also to use those *Means*, which are necessary and conducive to that End, it is a farther Consequence, that the Church may justly use all the *proper* Means of its Preservation: And therefore, if the *demanding* such Subscriptions, as I have before mention'd, shall appear to be *necessary* for this purpose, it hath and must have a *Right* to demand them.

This is no more than what is allow'd and practis'd by *all other* Societies. Their Good or Ill is known to depend on the Qualifications of those who preside in them; and therefore Rules are generally laid down, whereby their Merits and Qualifications shall be determin'd: Nor is a Proceeding of this kind ever complain'd of by sober Men, as a *Violation of natural Rights or Privileges*.

In short, as every Society hath a Right to *preserve* it self, so hath it of *judging* concerning those Means, which are necessary for its Preservation; and, in consequence of this, of *fixing* the Qualifications of those Officers, who are to be *employ'd* in supporting and defending it: From whence it further appears, that it must have a Right to prescribe proper *Tests* of these Qualifications: And if *Subscription* to a certain Scheme

Scheme of Doctrines shall appear to be such a *proper Test*, then the Church, as a *Society*, must have a Right to *demand* such a Subscription.

This Argument will be confirm'd if we consider further, that the Church is a *Society*, instituted for the *Promotion of religious Concerns*, and the *Preservation of our most holy Faith*. If it be a *religious Society*, then the *Preservation and Promotion* of Religion must be its proper End: And forasmuch as the Christian Religion consists partly of *Duties* to be perform'd, and partly of *Doctrines* to be receiv'd, it must therefore be the proper Business of this Society to *enforce* the One, and to *preserve* the Other. It is clear from hence, that *right Notions* concerning Duty and Faith ought, as far as possible, to be promoted by the Church; any notorious *Errors* in either respect tending to undermine and destroy our Religion. Care therefore should be taken that the Duties and Doctrines of Christianity be taught in their *primitive Purity*; and consequently, that those who *Officiate* in the great Work of Teaching be such, as *rightly understand* and *firmly believe* the several Truths of the Gospel. This must be admitted; or else it must be maintain'd, that the Church hath no Authority to pursue the very *End and Design* of its Institution. Now if the *Orthodoxy* of its particular Teachers be proper Matter of the Church's Care, then must it have a Right of prescribing those *Tests*, whereby this *Orthodoxy* may be *made appear*; and consequently, of framing a certain *Scheme of Articles* as a Test of their religious Notions.

14 *The CASE of Subscription*

The Power of the Church having been thus far insisted on, I will now proceed to the

2d Question propos'd, *viz.* How far it may be thought *reasonable* and *expedient* to exercise this Power. This Enquiry is of a different Nature from the former ; because, in many Instances, there may be Rights, the *Exercise* of which may be highly inexpedient. Thus, the Church, consider'd as *a Society*, hath evidently a Right of enjoining things in themselves *indifferent* ;—or, which are neither commanded nor forbidden by any Divine Law. Notwithstanding this, there may be some Particulars of this kind mention'd, the *Determination* of which would be attended with Inconveniencies : and therefore *Wisdom* and *Prudence* must here be us'd to direct the *Exercise* of those Powers which confessedly *belong* to it.

In order to know then how far the Exercise of acknowledg'd Rights is *proper*, we must consider what probable *Advantages* or *Disadvantages* will arise from it : These being duly consider'd, and carefully ballanc'd, the Solution of the Question will be plain and easy.

Thus, as to the Point we are now debating : The Method of requiring *Subscription* to Articles of Religion, from those who are to be admitted to the sacred Office, is *expedient*, as it is the best, and indeed the only probable Means of preventing the *Corruption* of our Faith ; and of providing that the several Doctrines of our Religion be *faithfully* inculcated on the People.

Something to this purpose hath been hinted before, under the former Head. To which I
will

will add here, that as it may reasonably be presum'd Men's *Preaching* will be influenc'd by their *religious Opinions*, so is it that their religious Opinions will be *known* by their *Subscriptions*; and consequently, by admitting none to the sacred Office, who refuse to Subscribe the Articles we are speaking of, due Care will be taken for the Prevention of *Error*, and the Propagation of *Truth*.

And an Expedient of this kind will appear the more proper, if we consider, that several pernicious Opinions have been *actually taught*, with relation to the Doctrines of the Gospel. The Church therefore cannot be too much on her Guard, to prevent, by all possible means, the *spreading* of these Opinions, and to secure the People against the fatal Effects of these Errors.

Had the Christian Religion been always maintain'd in its primitive *Purity*, an explicit Condemnation of several possible Heresies might have been esteem'd needless; and such Cautions would have been very unseasonable, if there were no apparent Danger. Accordingly, the Church hath generally proceeded in determining concerning particular Doctrines, by this Rule: And perhaps little more was *originally* requir'd, in this respect, from Pastors, than a Declaration of their Faith, concerning the *fundamental* Articles of Christianity. But, by Degrees, as Men began to try Practices on sacred Truth; partly, by intermixing their own vain Opinions, and partly by denying some Articles, or mis-interpreting others; it was found necessary to apply a Re-

medy to this Disease. Hence it came to pass that more *determinate* and *explicit* Declarations, concerning particular Points in our Religion, were now enjoin'd, than had been us'd before ; the *Growth* of Error multiplying such Articles, and the *Fences* of Truth only bearing Proportion to the *Encroachments* of Falsehood.

This will appear to have been the Point in View, when the xxxix *Articles* of our Church were fram'd ; since the greatest part of them are oppos'd to those dangerous Opinions, which then prevail'd.

We had just separated from the *Romish* Church : but no Security could be had, that the Corruptions, which we had reform'd, should not in a small time again *Prevail*, but by taking the utmost Care that the *Pastors* of our Church should be *free from* those Errors. It is upon this account, that a Condemnation of several *Popish* Doctrines bears so great a part in our *Articles* ; and that *Determinations* concerning some Points are there made, which were scarce thought of in the more early Ages.

It is further to be observ'd, that when the *Popish* Yoke was first thrown off, and the Scriptures began to be study'd with *Freedom*, it happen'd (as the best things are liable to Abuse) that several *extraordinary* *Seets* sprung up, which either reviv'd old Errors, - or invented new Ones. In opposition to These also we find several Decisions in our *Articles* ; the Expediency of which is sufficiently justified by the *Circumstances* of Things, and Occasions of the Times,

I will advance one Step further ; and endeavour to support the Point I am upon, by considering the Consequences of the contrary Opinion.

Those who assert that *Subscription* to Articles of Religion is *inexpedient*, must maintain one or other of these Schemes: Either,

First, That *no Enquiry* at all ought to be made about the *Religious Opinions* of those Persons, who offer themselves for the sacred Ministry ; Or else,

That an Assent to the Truth of Christ's *Messiahship* is sufficient for this Purpose ; Or else,

Lastly, That Faith in the Scriptures as the *Word of God*, with an Engagement to Preach what shall appear to be *contain'd in Scripture*, is all that can reasonably be demanded. Let us consider each of these Schemes distinctly.

And *First* then, If *no Enquiries* are at all to be made, about the religious Opinions of Christian Teachers, it will follow, that Men of *any*, or indeed *no Religion* may yet be qualified for the *Sacred Office*: An Absurdity so gross, I shall not pursue thro' its particular Consequences ; but think it sufficient to have just noted, what will be readily exploded by every *sober Christian*.

If an Assent to this Proposition alone, viz. *Jesus Christ is the Messiah*, be thought sufficient for the Purpose we are speaking of, then let it be consider'd, that, on this Supposition, no Provision is made for the Belief either of the *Particulars* of Christianity, or indeed of the *Christian Religion* it self. For, tho' the *Messiahship*

fiaship, and *Divine Mission of Christ* be the *Principle*, on which we build the Truth and Authority of our Religion, yet this leaves Men at Liberty to collect from other Considerations *What* this Religion is, and *Where* we are to find it: And the *Mahometans* themselves allow something not much short of this, when they own, that *Jesus Christ* is a true Prophet. But can any one seriously maintain that nothing more is necessary to qualify a Person for the *Christian Priesthood*, than what will readily be allow'd by a Disciple of *Mahomet*?

The Last, and indeed most plausible Scheme that can be maintain'd, in Opposition to the Method of particular Subscriptions, is this; *viz.* A Declaration that the Scriptures are the *Word of God*, with an Engagement to teach what shall appear to be contain'd in Scripture.

But may we not here demand, *What* Men understand by *Scripture*? for they are not always agreed upon this Point. And if this also must be left *undetermin'd*, the Declaration propos'd will be so loose and uncertain, that it will be difficult to say, *What* Religion is entertain'd by them: For this cannot well be known, till we are inform'd, *Where* to find their Religion, and *What* Books they allow to be the *Word of God*. But if by the *Scriptures* they mean some *certain* and *determin'd* Books, (those, for Instance, which are allow'd to be Canonical by the *Church of England*,) then this Declaration will be in a great measure liable to the *same Objections*, which may be made against particular Subscriptions: And the same

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Reasons, which may well be urg'd in favour of such a *Declaration*, will be equally favourable to the *Subscriptions* we are defending.

To come more home to the Point: Were Men entirely agreed as to the *Sense* of Scripture; and were not the same Passages sometimes alledg'd to support very *different Doctrines*, the Scheme propos'd might be thought *sufficient*: But then it must be observ'd withal, that it would, on this Supposition, coincide with the Method which We insist on; and it is much the same, whether we subscribe to the *Scripture* in general, whilst the particular Passages contain'd in it are *alike* understood by *all*,—or else make distinct Subscriptions to certain *Articles*, as truly representing the *Scripture Doctrine*. But the real State of the Case is otherwise: It hath been noted before, that very erroneous Doctrines have been *maintain'd*, and *taught*; and the Scriptures themselves alledg'd to *patronize* these Errors: In these Circumstances a Subscription to the Scriptures at large is by no means a sufficient Test of a Teacher's *Orthodoxy*: And if some Persons will, by an Abuse of Criticism; endeavour to pervert these Writings, something surely ought to be done to guard against such Abuses: and the evident *Necessity* of the thing is enough to defend this Practice. Again; If a bare Declaration of the Truth of *Scripture*, without determining in any Instance the *Sense* and *Meaning* of it, be judg'd *sufficient*, it will follow, that no *Errors* whatsoever, relating to the particular Doctrines of our Religion, ought to exclude a Man from
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20 *The CASE of Subscription*

the Work of *Teaching* ; if ye have but Weakness enough to imagine, that the Sacred Writings are on his side. Thus, not only *Liberty* will be allow'd, but *Countenance* given to the open Propagation of every possible *Heresy* ; Errors of every kind, will Successively prevail ; The weaker People will be led by the *Confidence* of some Teachers, and the *Subtlety* of others, from one Extream to another ; whilst the more indifferent Spectators will be tempted to *laugh* at all Religion whatsoever.

Having thus far noted the Inconveniencies which attend every other Scheme, it will be proper that I should now examine, whether our *own Method* be free from Objection. Now the chief Difficulties under which it labours, are These ;

First, That the Method of proposing Articles in *human* Forms, seems to derogate from the *Dignity*, and *Authority* of the Sacred Writings. And,

Secondly, That the making *Subscription* to such Articles a *Qualification* for the Sacred Office, is an establishing every *Error* which shall creep into the Church, and a preventing the very Possibility of *Reformation*.

The former Objection may seem to receive some Strength from observing, that the Scriptures are allow'd, by all *Protestants*, to be sufficient *plainly* and *clear* : Now what is of it self clear, can need no farther *Determination* : And, if there should be *Obscurities* or *Difficulties* in some Places, yet it cannot be hop'd that the *Things of God* shall be better express'd, than in the *Words of God* : or that
uninspir'd

uninspir'd and fallible Men shall prove surer Guides, than those who were inspir'd, and therefore infallible.

The Objection, if it proves any thing, proves too much: For, if Scripture be express'd in so *clear* Terms as to need no farther *Determination*, it must be so plain as to need no farther *Explication*: Upon which Supposition, those learned Men have been ill employ'd, who have taken such Pains in *illustrating* the sacred Writings; and the *Preachers of the Gospel* may well enough be spar'd as a useless and insignificant Institution. Besides; When 'tis urg'd that *the Scriptures are plain*, and that *the things of God cannot be better express'd, than in the Words of God*, this must refer to the Scriptures in their *original Language*; or to Those Words in which the things of God were *Originally* express'd: If this way of arguing therefore be admitted, it will follow, that all *Versions* and *Translations* of the Bible must be condemn'd; because These are a *Varying* from the Words of God, and an affixing the *Translator's Sense* to the *Author's Expression*.

But be this as it will; yet it is well known, that Words, which had *originally* a determinate Signification, do in *Time* become uncertain and equivocal: and therefore, however clear and plain the Scriptures might *originally* be, yet in *Tract of Time*, Words having acquir'd different Meanings, they may well admit of *Comment* and *Explication*; nor is this any *Impeachment* of the *Dignity* of Scripture, but only an *Argument* of the *Defects* of Language.

22 *The CASE of Subscription*

guage. I shall add but one thing more on this Objection: *viz.* That the *Determination* of Scripture Expressions, or the affixing, in *Articles* drawn up for that purpose, a *particular* Meaning to the *general* Words of Scripture, hath been chiefly owing to the *Corruptions*, which have in several Ages been introduc'd: And had not bold Men arisen, who, under the Cover of *Scripture Forms*, insinuated Doctrines directly *contrary* to Scripture, there would have been less Occasion for the Method we have been speaking of: So that this Expedient is what the Church had rather been *forc'd* upon by the unhappy Circumstances of things, than willingly and of herself chosen.

The Second Difficulty in our Method was this; That the making Subscription to particular Articles a *Qualification* for the sacred Office, is an establishing every *Error* which shall creep into the Church, and a preventing all Possibility of *Reformation*.

We may reply, that according to this way of arguing, there ought to be no such thing as *human Laws*; because these may as well be applied to support *Ill*, as to promote *Good*: And yet this is never, by sober Persons, thought an Objection against Laws in general.

Again; for the same Reason that *Subscriptions* of this kind, may be suppos'd to establish those *Errors* which shall creep into the Church, must they in like manner maintain and continue that *Truth*, which once prevails: And, if it be thought, that upon this foot, there can be no *Reformation* of Mistakes, then (supposing Men are once in the right)

no Mistakes can ever happen: The Objection therefore answers itself; and kindly guards us against the very Difficulty which it urges.

But, without taking this Advantage, we will allow, that we are, (notwithstanding all the Precautions that can be us'd) liable to Mistakes; and that it may happen, (for it hath happen'd in Fact) that Truth shall gradually be corrupted. But then it must withal be admitted, that as *Error* may gradually prevail against *Truth*, so may *Truth* gradually prevail against *Error*: nor is there any Reason to suppose, that *Falshood* can better maintain it self, than *Truth*.

Once more, and to have done with the Objection: Reason and Argument, and a due Consideration of things, are the Means whereby Truth must prevail against Error: Supposing therefore that Errors should be *introduc'd* and be in a certain Sense *establisb'd*; yet why must the *Governing* part of the Church be alone presum'd incapable of Conviction? The very same Means, whereby *other* Persons may be induc'd to receive the Truth, are equally capable of influencing *them* also; and therefore there is *no Impossibility* that Errors, once receiv'd, should be *reform'd*, on the Scheme we are defending.

Nay, this is so far from being impossible, that the Reformation of our Church, from the Corruptions of *Popery*, is a plain Evidence of what I have now asserted. This great Turn and Revolution in Religion must be ascrib'd to our *Ecclesiastical Superiors*; who, as they begun, so they finish'd the Reformation

24 *The CASE of Subscription*

by a proper Care about the *Opinions* of the *Clergy*. And when Matters are duly consider'd, I doubt not but it will be found, that the *Protestant Religion* cannot be Supported, but by having Recourse to the same Means, whereby it was first Establish'd.

Thirdly, I will now proceed to the Third, and last Head propos'd, *viz.* What *Obligations* are laid on those who *Subscribe to Articles of Religion*.

I have noted something to this purpose in the Beginning of this Discourse; *viz.* That a *Subscription to Articles*, is a Declaration of our *Belief*; and implies an *Assent to the Truth* of those Propositions, which are contain'd in them.

All the Considerations therefore, which can be urg'd to prove our Obligation to moral Honesty, are so many Arguments of our Duty to subscribe without *Equivocation* or *Reserve*: Nor can any thing be urg'd to justify or excuse a Prevarication in this respect, which will not tend to destroy all mutual Trust and Confidence amongst Men. Whosoever therefore is not really perswaded, that the Doctrines contain'd in our Articles are *true*, cannot *Subscribe*, without an high Violation of *moral Honesty*, and a breaking in upon the *fundamental Principle*, on which all Society must be built.

For the same Reasons must we censure and condemn a Subscribing to our Articles with this Reservation, *viz.* *As far as they are agreeable with Scripture*; this being a Way of eluding these Tests of our religious Opinions
and

and in effect no Subscription at all. Are the *Articles* of the Church of *England* really agreeable with Scripture, or are they not? If they are *not*, then every honest Man should decline any Subscription to them; because, by this Act, he openly professes his Belief, that they *are* agreeable with Scripture. But if any Persons will however insist on this Reservation, then let them consider that the Subscription and the Reservation, taken together, amount to this, viz. *I do declare, that these Articles are agreeable with Scripture, so far forth as they are agreeable with Scripture.* This is as much a trifling with common Sense, as with common *Honesty*.

To proceed; It hath been already observ'd that these *Subscriptions* are demanded for the *Satisfaction* of our Ecclesiastical Superiors concerning our Sentiments in religious Matters: they must therefore imply in them all that is necessary in order to give the *Satisfaction* intended; and consequently, must be understood in such a Sense, as will answer this Purpose.

From hence it follows, that the *Articles* subscrib'd ought to be understood, not indifferently in *any* Sense, of which the Words may *of themselves*, be capable; but in That precise and determinate Signification, which was intended by the *Imposers* of them. This, I say, is plain from hence, that otherwise We evade the Test prescrib'd, and give no Satisfaction in the Points demanded.

But if it be admitted, that We ought to Subscribe, *not* in our own private Sense; but according to the Meaning and Intention of the

26 *The CASE of Subscription*

the *Imposers*; It may be further enquir'd, how we shall fix and determine that Sense; especially since there may be Articles express'd in such Terms, as make a Solution of this Question difficult.

The *Imposers* then in the present Case of Subscriptions, are, The *Governing* Part of the Church; by which we are not to understand merely the *Compilers* of the Articles; or those who were Governors of the Church when the Articles were compil'd, *exclusively of all others*, but our Ecclesiastical Governors in *general*; it being plain, that we equally receive Laws from *all* our Ecclesiastical Governors in Succession. Theirs therefore is the Sense, in which we must subscribe these Articles; and How we may discover this Sense, will, I hope, appear from the following Considerations.

We may certainly know the Meaning of the *Imposers*, if the Article be express'd in Words, which have a *single* and *determinate* Sense, according to the *common Use* of Language. And if Words, singly and separately taken, are *loose* and *indeterminate*, yet their Sense may be fix'd by the *Circumstances* of the Article, in which they are found; and Expressions of themselves *doubtful*, may become *certain*, by considering their Coherence with other Parts of the Proposition.

It may happen however, in some Instances, that the Meaning of Words may not be certainly determinable, either by *common Use*, or by the *Circumstances* of the Article. If this prove the Case, then we are to understand them in such a Sense, as is *consistent* with

with *other Articles of Religion*: For, being oblig'd to subscribe to *all*, we ought to understand them in such a Sense, as is *consistent* with all; it being absurd to declare our Belief of Contradictions.

But if Expressions should occur, which cannot be determin'd by Passages in *other Articles*; then will it be proper to enquire, whether they may be fix'd by our *Publick Liturgy*, or by any other Monuments, which have the Sanction of *Ecclesiastical Authority*. The Propositions set forth in any of our Articles, ought to be understood in such a Sense, as is consistent with every other *Determination* of the Church; because the Church cannot be suppos'd to intend *one* thing in some of her publick Acts, and the direct *contrary* in others: To which we may add, that those who *Subscribe* the Articles of Religion, are oblig'd to admit those other *Determinations* also; and consequently, must subscribe them in such a *Sense* as will make them *agree* and be *consistent* with each other.

Thus far an honest and sincere Enquirer may be satisfied concerning the Intention of the *Imposers*, in the several Articles which we Subscribe.

But if it should happen, in some few Cases, that Propositions are express'd in such Terms, as have not a *single* and *determinate* Sense, according to the *common Use* of Language; and the Meaning of which cannot be fix'd in *other Articles*, or by other *publick Monuments* of The Church; then it seems clear, that Men of *different Sentiments* may fairly subscribe them; provided

28 *The CASE of Subscription*

provided the Sense, in which they Subscribe, be not different from some or other of the *ordinary Acceptations* of these Terms. Such a Latitude of *Expression* must certainly admit as great a Latitude of *Interpretation*; and if a Liberty of this kind had not been originally *intended*, we may fairly presume it would, by some Act or other, have been *restrain'd*.

To speak strictly, a Subscription to Such Articles, can, in the Nature of things, amount to no more than this: *viz.* That we renounce the several Doctrines, which are inconsistent with *every Sense* of the Propositions, without declaring any thing concerning the *particular* and *determinate* Sense of them: The Articles, taken in one View, are indeed *exclusive* of certain Opinions; and thus a *Subscription* to them is a *Condemnation* of those Opinions: But, in another respect, they are suppos'd to be *indeterminate*; and so far our *Subscription* must be *indeterminate* also; *i. e.* it must not be understood as a *certain* Declaration either of this, or that *particular* Opinion.

From what hath been advanc'd under this Head, it will be easy to determine concerning those who contend, that our Articles are to be subscrib'd in *that Sense* only, wherein they are *agreeable with Scripture*; or, in other Words, who explain our Articles by their own *private Interpretations* of Scripture; and consequently subscribe in that Sense only which agrees with such *Interpretations*.

To prevent all needless Dispute on this Point, we will suppose here, that some Propositions in the xxxix Articles may be capable
of

of different grammatical Senses ; and that those who subscribe, do subscribe in some such Sense, as the Propositions, taken by themselves, are capable of. We admit also, that forasmuch as Scripture is the *Word of God*, nothing ought to be subscrib'd in a Sense *contrary* to Scripture : And forasmuch as every Man's *own* Sense of it, is, *to him*, the true Sense, therefore no Man ought to subscribe to any Propositions in such a Sense, as is inconsistent with his own *Interpretations* of Scripture.

Thus far, I presume, we are agreed : But then we may differ very widely in our Conclusion. For, the Scripture is not to be here consider'd as explicatory of *our Articles*, but our Articles as explicatory of *the Scripture* : and therefore the Church's Sense, in the *Articles* subscrib'd, is not to be determin'd by considering *Scripture*, but her Sense of *Scripture* is to be determin'd by considering the *Articles*. To fix then the *Church's Sense*, we must have Recourse to some such Rules, as I have before propos'd : And if it shall appear, that the Church's Sense, thus discover'd, is inconsistent with what We judge to be the true *Meaning* and *Interpretation* of Scripture, then we cannot, consistently with the common Rules of *Honesty*, subscribe at all.

To be more particular ; There can be but *three* Cases, (as was before observ'd,) with reference to the *Meaning* of our Articles. They are either express'd in Words, the Sense of which is *determin'd* by the *common Use* of Language ; — Or else, in Words of *themselves* capable of *different* Senses, but the Sense

30 *The CASE of Subscription*

of which is determin'd by the Church in some or other of her *publick Acts*; — Or, lastly, in such, as are, in *neither* of these respects, determin'd and restrain'd. The former Case hath nothing to do with the present Question: And as to the Last, the Articles being suppos'd to be *indeterminate*, the *Subscription* must be so too; and therefore, the Church having exacted nothing *special*, the Subscriber may abound in his own Sense: In this Instance he may be allow'd to interpret the Articles agreeably to his *own* Sense of Scripture; the Words being suppos'd, according to *common Use*, capable of such a Meaning. But what we maintain is this; that in the Second Case, where the Meaning of the Articles is already fix'd by some *publick Act* of the Church, there no Liberty can be allow'd of *altering* the Sense of it, and of adjusting it to *our own* Interpretations of Scripture. And this may be maintain'd, as by the Argument before insisted on, so also by This; that He who subscribes One Article, equally subscribes the rest; and, what is more, equally professes Submission to every other Determination of the Church: To subscribe therefore in a Sense, suppos'd to be agreeable with *Scripture*, but at the same time inconsistent with other *Ecclesiastical Determinations*, is, to assert and maintain Contradictions: It is to support, and to deny the very same thing; and to oppose Scripture under the Pretence of defending it.

Thus I have gone thro' with the several Heads propos'd; and shall only add, that if *We know these things, happy are we if we do them;*

them ; if we neither question an evident *Authority*, — nor dispute against a *reasonable* Injunction, --nor, under the *Shew* of Compliance, defeat the very *End* and *Design* of the Injunction. A good Man will be Cautious, but not Subtle : He will first Examine with *Impartiality* and *Care*, and then Subscribe with *Sincerity* and *Plainness*. — May no Complaints of the contrary Practice be ever justly made against the Clergy of our Church : — Better things may be hop'd than this ; for *We have not so learnt Christ*.

F I N I S.



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